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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and examines an experimental and innovative program at the Center for the Teaching of Foreign Languages at the National Autonomous University of Mexico to provide teacher education courses by means of distance learning. This program was undertaken in response to a scarcity of qualified language teachers. It is aimed at teachers who have at least a bachelor's degree in applied linguistics or a related field and have a reading knowledge of English. Six courses are planned: Learning applied linguistics at a distance; linguistic aspects for communicative approaches; reading comprehension; language testing; introduction to applied linguistics; and writing for English teachers. All courses except for the introductory course are four months long. Distance education plays an important role in educational institutions because of its flexibility and accessibility to populations who might not otherwise be able to complete a degree or take continuing education courses. It is not quick, easy, or cheap as is widely believed. The same course taught in a classroom cannot simply be delivered via distance education; significant adjustments must be made. Teachers at both ends of the process must be involved in course planning and the learning process. The teacher/planner begins to realize the importance of learning theories in the context where the student is physically absent and where the planner must make the learning process accessible, valuable, and motivating. Four appendices, including graphics, data, and references are included. (KFT)

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Teaching Teachers Long-distance: A paradigm-shift for the Teacher-Planner in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This paper will address the current process that the Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE) or the Center for Teaching of Foreign Languages at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is undergoing in order to provide some Teacher Education courses by means of Distance Learning. The CELE represents an important center in Mexico for both the teaching of foreign languages and teacher education programs. The educational background of language teachers and the opportunities available to them for study are determining aspects for the creation of a distance education program for language teachers. Few distance programs currently exist in the area of applied linguistics. The planning and realization of continuing education courses for teachers will be described. Practical considerations for planning include: the development and design of a didactic model, the setting of long and short-term goals for the project and its teacher courses, two examples of courses in progress and finally what positive and concrete results we expect this project will attain.

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The context

The Centro de Ensenañza de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE) or the Center for Teaching of Foreign Languages is currently involved in a project to provide distance education courses for language teachers. The CELE is the oldest of the language departments of the six campuses of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and has two main functions: one of which is to provide language classes to about 10,000 university students in 14 different languages and the other which is to carry out research in the Department of Applied Linguistics, which is accomplished by the 65 full and part-time teachers. The CELE is an important center in Mexico for teacher education if we consider that: it has granted 650 diplomas as part of its Certificate Program in Teacher Education since 1980, it has graduated 59 students with the M.A. in Applied Linguistics since 1979 (153 students in total having finished their coursework for the M.A.), and beginning in 1999 it will offer a Ph.D. in Linguistics. The language teachers who finish these programs teach at public and private institutions at the high school, bachelor, and graduate levels.

However, since all of these programs are given on-site, teachers and researchers at the CELE have begun to see the need to offer more flexible programs to off-site populations. At the UNAM, open or continuing education degrees currently exist although within the CELE only the Certificate Program can be taken this way and students must come on-site once per week. Another language center in the UNAM Acatlán Campus is currently planning to offer a B.A. in language teaching in an open-learning model. Other institutions, such as the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM-a private university), offer a variety of

programs via distance education, such as a Master's degree in Education with a specialization in Applied Linguistics and a Ph.D. in Educational Technology and Innovation. The cost of these two degrees at the ITESM are prohibitive for most Mexican students. The British Council offers a M.A. and Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics for Mexican students in a open model which requires attendance to classes and distance learning (personal communication, D.M. Gilbón, June 10, 1999). At this time, there are few options for working language teachers since the open and distance programs available don't necessarily cater to the needs of all language teachers. The CELE's goal is to plan distance courses for language teachers which would be open to a larger population and to eventually grant these courses curricular and/or degree value.

The need for distance courses has been present for some time. Mexico has a shortage of prepared language teachers which means that more often than not teachers who are proficient in a foreign language (mainly English) and who have little or no formal education in teacher training give classes both in the public and private sector. Teachers who wish to obtain a degree or certificate in applied linguistics or related field need programs which can adapt to their personal situations, whether the students work, have a family, or cannot leave their place of work. The current situation of language teachers in Mexico can be understood if we look at some studies and statistics about their professional background and the degree programs available to them. In Appendix 1, if we look at the total number of teachers surveyed in 1995-96 and their professional background, it works out that out of the total 754 teachers, 1 out of 3 has a some sort of degree. Behind the numbers there is another story, since although only 190 teachers have the B.A., another 140 teachers have finished their coursework for the B.A. The situation is similar

for the M.A. since another 41 teachers have finished their coursework for the M.A. although only 29 currently have the M.A. This lack of degrees in hand is due to the fact that in Mexico at most higher education institutions a thesis is required both at the B.A. and M.A. level. In addition, there are another 2 teachers who are doctoral candidates. Appendix 2 illustrates the distribution of degrees obtained versus coursework finished for this sample of 754 teachers. Of the teachers that have degrees, 16% of them have a B.A. in Language Teaching, 4.3% of them have a B.A. in Humanities, and 23% of them have a B.A. in other areas. At the Master's level, 5.5% of the teachers have the M.A. in other areas and 4% have the M.A. in Applied Linguistics or related areas. (See Appendix 3) Interestingly enough, contrary to what one might think, of the few private institutions reporting, the teachers there don't differ in their profile from those in public institutions. This profile of these language teachers shows that there is a need for programs in applied linguistics which would allow teachers to continue their professional development in the field they work in (Gilbón Acevedo, 1998).

In terms of degree programs, there are more at the Bachelor's level than at the Graduate level. The Bachelor's degree programs in areas related to applied linguistics can be broken down into the following areas:

Table 1
Bachelor degree programs in Mexico in areas related to Applied Linguistics

B.A.	
AREA	**# of Existing Programs in 1999**
a) Language Teaching	24
b) Languages	29
c) Humanities	31
d) Linguistics	7
e) Language Therapy	3
f) Translation and Interpretation	7
TOTALS	**101**

(Costa, Gilbón, Herrera & Valdez, 1999).

The number of students enrolled in the different degree programs varies. The B.A. in Language Teaching has the greatest number enrolled having 3779 students in 1997, 446 of whom had finished their coursework and another 187 who had received their degrees. The number of students receiving degrees is quite low compared to the number enrolled and could indicate a need for flexible programs such as distance or open programs. In the related areas of Languages, Humanities and Linguistics, it is difficult to know what the profile of these students is and if they later go on to work in language teaching. And, if they do become language teachers, does their bachelor's degree program prepare them adequately (Costa et al, 1999)? Graduate degree programs are much fewer, there being 16 Master's programs in areas related to Applied Linguistics which are located in 22% of the states in Mexico. Doctoral degree programs are in total 5 and all of them are located in Mexico City (Costa et al, 1999).

The Project

This scarcity of qualified language teachers with some sort of official credential has prompted teacher trainers at the CELE to propose and plan courses for language teachers to be given via distance learning. Beginning in the Fall of 2000, the courses will be piloted with students that have at least completed the B.A. in applied linguistics or a related field and have a reading knowledge of English. Six on-line courses are currently in the planning and development stages: 1) How can I learn Applied Linguistics at a Distance?- *An Introductory Course* 2) Linguistics Aspects for Communicative Approaches 3) Reading Comprehension 4) Language Testing 5) Introduction to Applied Linguistics and 6) Writing for English Teachers. Several of these courses are being planned in reponse to a need expressed by the language departments during the 1995-96 survey. All courses except for the introductory course will last four months. The teacher recepients in this case are active teachers teaching a foreign language at the high school, bachelor's and graduate level at six institutions and will take part in a pilot program which is expected to last 3 years beginning in Fall 1999.

This three year project has been set into motion because of inter and intra-institutional agreements which have been established and they will provide the project with technological support, on-site advisors, and continuing education courses in technology use both for the planners and learners. This project began in June 1998 when we first offered an introductory course on distance education which presented the teachers at the CELE with an overall view of what distance education is, what it involves, and how it differs from traditional classroom courses. This course also incorporated the use of an e-mail discussion list, EDCELE, the use of

videoconference, and a web page (*http://www.nalejandria.com/akademeia/klusnia/index.htm*) with distance education resources so that teachers could experiment with these media. This course was followed by a Seminar and Workshop in January 1999 where several experts were invited to talk about their experiences and knowledge about distance education. In the workshop section, the participants concentrated on evaluating materials found in distance courses on the web. Here, they made judgements about the materials rating them on their accessibility and deciding which learning theories the courses were based on. The same teachers are now taking a course on how to elaborate web pages for their own courses.

This continuing education process has revealed some interesting results so far. First, teachers have different levels of integration and acceptance of the project. Many are still unclear about the differences distance education represents in comparision with classroom classes. Some do not realize that a classroom lesson cannot be directly translated into a distance lesson. This is an interesting point since some of the experts involved in the January Seminar had a more traditional view about the teaching-learning process. That is to say that some of the experts didn't consider the differences involved when delivering distance education and used technology to give essentially the same class they would have given in a classroom without considering the learners or learning theories. This points to the necessity for a Distance Education Model when putting a distance education program into place. Learning how to use technology and integrate it into our courses also represents a challenge. The teachers have very diverse experiences with e-mail, discussion lists, the internet, and videoconference. Their acceptance and everyday use of these technologies in some cases is slow and infrequent

but they are beginning to realize that these will become the tools which shorten the distances between us and our students. The integration of these technologies into our courses is being made in hopes of creating virtual learning communities where teachers can exchange and comment upon issues that are important to them. We think that this will promote greater communication and reflection within the language teaching community and also encourage collaboration and involvement among teachers for projects and conferences.

An integral part of the planning is the construction of a didactic model for distance education. Its construction allows the community planning such a project to consider how distance education differs from classroom education. The following table (Table 2) illustrates the different elements to be considered as well as the interdependency of the elements. Depending upon the choices made about each of the elements, the choices about the others will be affected. A didactic model essentially involves the way in which all the different participants establish communication in order to reach the proposed objectives of a program or course, for example: the sending and reception of course materials or the organization of tutorials. More concretely, if the students live in remote communities which do not have access to the *W W W*, it may not be possible to ask them to send their homework via e-mail and a delivery service will have to be used.

Table 2
Conditions which make possible didactic communication at a distance (Gilbón & Lusnia, 1999)

Selection of media which conforms to available resources and to the specific necessities of the participants	<---------->	Production of diverse materials with activities which promote independent learning
^ | | | v		^ | | | v
Other ways of evaluating in which learners, tutors, and advisors participate	<---------->	The form and frequency of tutorials at a distance or on-site as well as the participation of on-site advisors

^
|
|
|
v

Accessibility to bibliographic and journal resources, information networks such as Internet, and communication with other participants

Our model is being constructed collaboratively with the multi-disciplinary participation of the CELE teachers who are planning the courses, a librarian, the on-site advisors, a graphic designer, and a computer specialist. The inclusion of different types of experts is done in hopes of creating a model which includes many perspectives and considers different proposals. We plan to create this model using the discussion list, EDCELE, where everyone can participate, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of

different options, and contribute their different experiences and perspectives. It is clear to us that every institution and its context determine the characteristics of the model. That said, we understand that the model we are constructing will have to be flexible in order to adapt to the conditions of our target population at each different site. The courses themselves may have different characteristics to adapt to the different conditions. There is no one model which will serve all purposes for all courses. We plan on using both more traditional resources like printed materials and readings and technology for communication such as internet, videoconference and e-mail all the while being prepared to adapt to the necessities, resources, and expectations of our learners.

This project has required a large amount of time for its planning given its complexity and the number of elements that need to be considered. This project must provide continuing education to the teachers planning the courses in order for it to be a success. A large number of the activities planned, especially in the first year, have to do with developing an infrastructure and giving teachers the tools they need to develop their courses. It is essential to set concrete goals involving the participants of the project for several reasons. First, it makes everyone aware of what needs to be done and when and second, through the planning process, there is negotiation and a realization of what the project lacks. This process of negotiation allows the project to be adopted more easily by the participants. How the project is going to be managed has an important influence on how the participants will participate and do their jobs. Additionally, establishing time lines for the short and long-term goals to be accomplished allows the project to proceed in a concrete and timely manner. Laying everything out on the table providing the participants the chance to discuss the project gives

them a sense of ownership and greater committment to their responsabilities within it. Although this plan will differ according to the institution, many elements and goals will be common to distance projects and may provide some guidelines for what to include or consider in the short and long term goals of a distance education project. (See Appendix 4)

Of the six courses which are currently in the planning stages, two of them, How can I learn Applied Linguistics at a Distance?- *An Introductory Course* and Language Testing, are in more advanced stages of development. The first course has been conceived from the beginning as an on-line course and has as its objective to introduce the subject of applied linguistics and to have students practice using different electronic resources such as e-mail, the internet, and sending and receiving attachments. It also serves to give the student an idea about what is involved in the study of a distance course. This course is expected to last only about a month to give students the chance to experiment both technologies and what it's like to take a course via distance education. The on-line questionnaires that the student fills out also gives the tutor/instructor a profile of their technological experience, learning styles, and the student's abilities for independent study and will work as a diagnostic both for the tutor and the student.

The Language Testing course originated out of the June 1998 course in the CELE. The bibliographic search for articles took about nine months and at this point we are selecting the articles we will use for the course. In this particular field, the majority of recent articles are in English although we have been able to find some bibliography in Spanish. The fact that most of the articles are in English has presented us with some challenges and restrictions. We have made a particular effort to locate articles in Spanish but at the same time, we are being forced to require a reading knowledge of

English of our students. Following the pilot of the course, we may have to alter this requirement and integrate more planners into the course to translate pertinent materials. Language testing is an important topic for language teachers since in all language centers teachers are involved in evaluation either in the classroom, on testing committees, or in official accreditation. The course looks at language testing in a broad context yet has a mainly practical focus since it is directed towards practicing language teachers in mind. At this stage, we are developing the seven different themes of the course and have made several decisions about how we would like the course to proceed. The participants will use e-mail both for advising purposes and to participate in a course discussion list, the study guide and the course activities/homeworks will be based on meaningful learning and constructivist learning theories, the course will integrate the use of printed and on-line resources, and self-evaluation will be used as well as formative and summative. We consider that our choice of learning theories is pertinent because we want the course to be both useful to the student and also help the student to overcome distances and construct his knowledge in an active way through the exercises he does and checks and the interaction he has with fellow classmates, tutors and advisors. Once we know who the students in the course will be, we will be able to determine more closely, through the use of questionnaires, what their specific needs, desires and resources for learning are and make the necessary adjustments to the course. This might be in terms of how students want to work, the availability of computers or their time constraints as working teachers.

Conclusions

Distance education plays an important role today in educational institutions because of its flexibility and accessibility to populations who might not otherwise be able to complete a degree or take continuing education courses. It is quite innovative in that it takes a different look at the teaching-learning process and considers the uniqueness of the distance student and his/her special needs and personal situation. Planning and putting together a distance program and courses requires many elements and much consideration. Administrators and so-called experts tend to see this way of educating as being quick, easy and cheap while it is really none of the above. It is not possible to take the same class one teaches in the classroom and deliver it via distance education. Adjustments have to be made and every educational context represents a different challenge. This lack of knowledge makes the training of the teacher/planner, on-site advisors and learners who will take part in the project extremely important. Teachers have to be involved in the decision-making and learning process so that they feel a high degree of ownership in the project and therefore tend to adopt something so innovative more easily. Without this kind of support and participation in continuing education courses, there is a much higher risk of desertion and disinterest in the project. Training in distance education sensitizes teachers to its differences from classroom education. The teacher/planner begins to realize the importance of learning theories in this context where the student is physically absent and where the planner must make every attempt to make the learning process accessible, valuable and motivating. In terms of the CELE's project, there are many questions which cannot be answered until we begin piloting the courses. Although we hope

that our students have both a B.A. in applied linguisctis or related field and a reading knowledge of English, we may find out that our population does not fit this profile and adjustments or further training of the students may have to be implemented. The teachers/planners involved in this project see it as a process which will reveal its difficulties and benefits as the project develops. This project promises to have an important impact on our Center and how we view teacher education and more importantly on the larger community of language teachers who are in need of continuing education courses. Once the project has reached its term, we hope to offer these courses in a permanent form having curricular and degree value. This project has the much greater challenge of providing a solution to the institutional problem of teachers teaching without degrees and the number of students unable to finish the degrees they start.

Reference List

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Gilbón Acevedo, D.M. (1998). _Bases Teoricas y Empiricas para la Creación de posgrados en Lingüística Aplicada a Distancia_. Unpublished master's thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

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Appendix 1
Professional background of language teachers in State Universities according to their educational level: Survey 1995-96
(28 Language Centers)

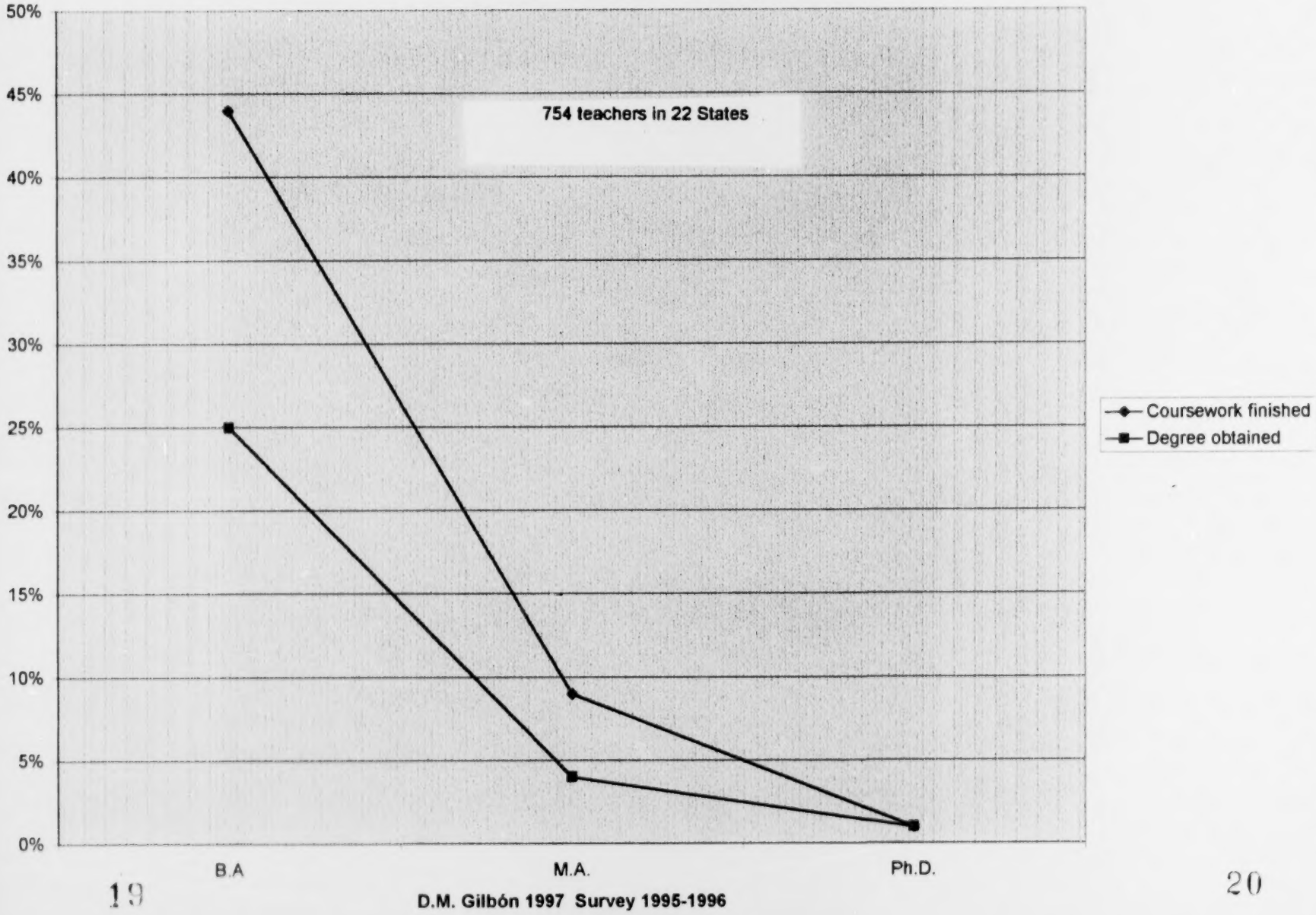
State	Institution	Total # of teachers	B.A.	M.A.	Ph.D.
Baja C. Sur	U.A. Baja California	19	6		
Campeche	U.A. de Campeche	23			
Coahuila	U.A. Antonio Narro, U. Laguna	2			
Coahuila	U. de Torreón	11	8	1	
Colima	U. de Colima	10	3		2
Chiapas	U.A. de Chiapas III	14	6	1	
Chihuahua	U.A. de Cd. Juarez	18	11	6	
Guanajuato	U. de Guanajuato	43	20	8	
Guanajuato	U. de Celaya*	6	4		
Jalisco	U. de Guad. P. Vallarta	14			
Mexico State	U.A. del Edo. de Mexico	91			
Michoacán	U. Vasco de Quiroga*	13			1
Michoacán	U.M. de Sn. Nicolás de Hgo	30	10	4	

State	Institution	Total #of Teachers	B.A.	M.A.	Ph.D.
Nayarit	U.A. de Nayarit	30			
Nuevo León	U.A. de Nuevo León	84	54	1	
Nuevo León	U. de Monterrey*	18			1
Quintana Roo	U. de Quintana Roo	5	1		
San Luis Potosi	U. de San Luis Potosi	60	6		
San Luis Potosi	U.A. SLP Zona Media	31	27	3	
Sinaloa	U. de Occidente	14			
Sonora	U. de Sonora	64	16	5	2
Tabasco	U.A. de Tabasco	51			
Tamaulipas	U.A. de Tamaulipas	42			
Tlaxcala	U.A. de Tlaxcala	17			
Veracruz	U. Veracruzana Poza R	16			
Yucatán	U.A. de Yuc. Especialización	6	6		
Yucatán	U.A. de Yucatán	14	12		
Zacatecas	U.A. de Fresnillo*	8			
22 States	Totals	754	190	29	6

Survey: Feasibility of Graduate Programs via Distance Education in the area of applied linguistics or in language sciences (Gilbón Acevedo, 1998)
*Private Institution.

Appendix 2

Professional Background of the Language Teachers in State Universities



D.M. Gilbón 1997 Survey 1995-1996

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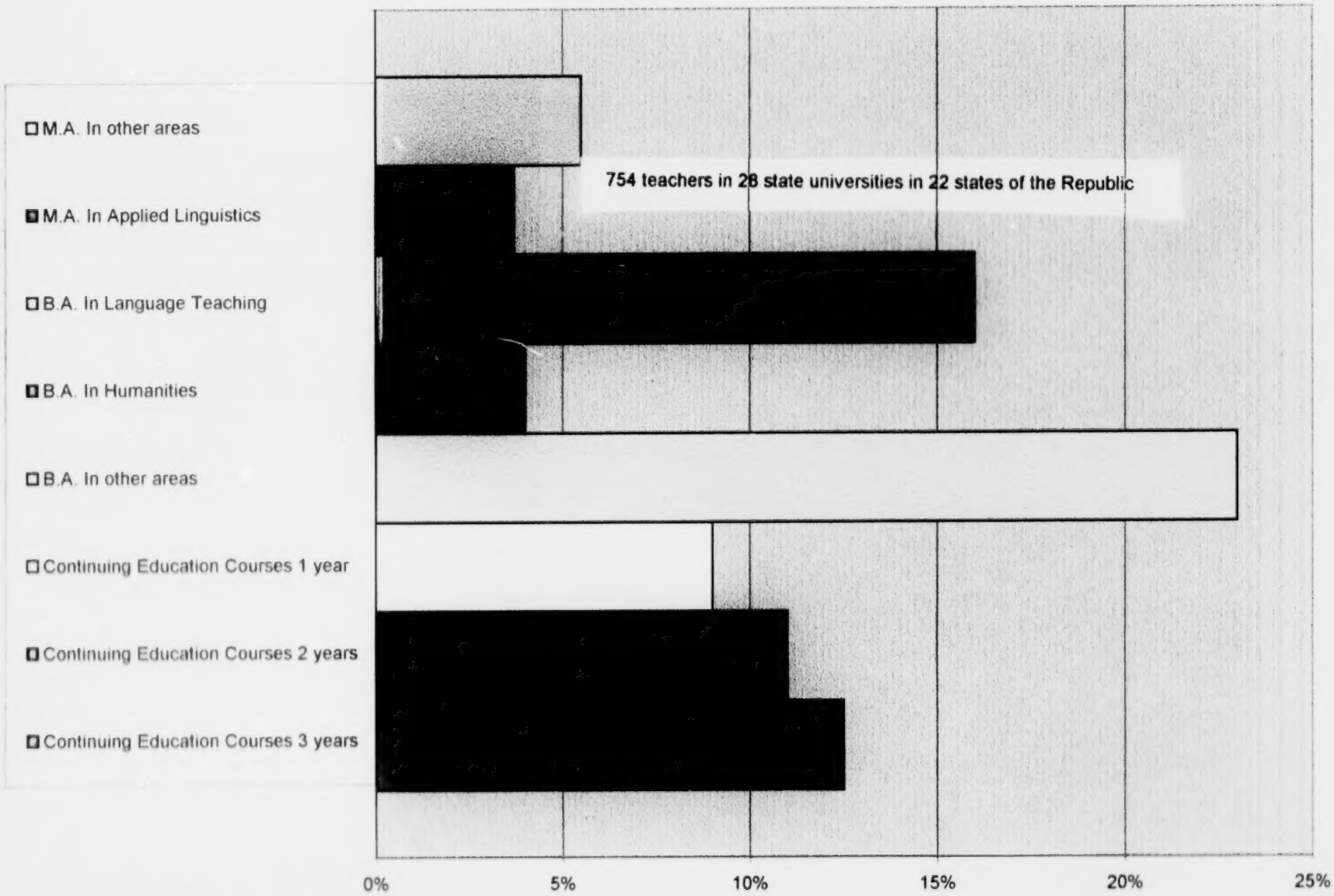
Appendix 3

Professional Background of Language Teachers (breakdown by area and length of study)



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Appendix 4

The first year (Fall 1999-June 2000) will be dedicated to the:

-acquisition of computers and a server
-continuing education courses for CELE teachers on: discussion list management, materials design, on-line publication, and use of interactive videoconference (for tutorials) for CELE teachers, on-site advisors, and the learners.
-planning of the course programs, bibliographic search and selection of printed and electronic materials for the six courses.
-development of the didactic model via the discussion list EDCELE.
-electronic publication of the introductory course- How can I learn Applied Linguistics at a Distance? and elaboration of an audio cassette for this course.
-piloting of the introductory course with the on-site advisors in the six different sites.
-elaboration of the study guide and videocassette for the Language Testing course.
-presentation of results at national and international conferences.

The second year (August 2000-June 2001) will be dedicated to the:

-course for CELE teachers on how to evaluate distance education courses.
-elaboration of the study guides for the four remaining courses.
-implementation of the didactic model and pilot of the introductory course at the different sites.
-development, electronic publication and pilot of the Language Testing course.
-presentation of papers at conferences for the promotion of the project.

The third year (August 2001-June 2002) will be dedicated to the:

--continuing education course/s on the evaluation of distance education courses.
-electronic publication and piloting of the four remaining courses at the sites.
-incorporation of the audio and videocassette into the courses.
-publication of a brochure promoting the on-line courses.
-electronic publication and printed edition of a collection of essays, "A telematic community of learning for language teachers: the participants' views," which will include theoretical aspects and experiences of the learners, on-site advisors, designers and tutors of the courses delivered via distance education by the CELE.